

FLORIDA'S EDUCATION REFORM LESSONS FOR WISCONSIN AND THE NATION

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Executive Summary

In 1999, Florida lawmakers began the push for major education reforms combining top-down and bottom-up approaches to improve K-12 schools. Florida reformers put in a clear set of academic standards and increased transparency by grading schools A, B, C, D or F based on level of performance and growth over time. Failing schools faced real consequences, and the state embraced alternative teacher certification. K-3 teachers were retrained on reading methodologies, and the social promotion of children was curtailed. On the bottom-up side, the state created large statewide private choice programs, a vigorous charter school law, and embraced online learning.

Ten years later, the results can only be described as very impressive. Florida's 4th grade reading scores, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, have improved to the point where Florida's Hispanic students outscore 15 statewide averages for all students. Florida's African American students now outscore two statewide averages for all students, and are within striking distance of several others.

Florida's low-income students (eligible for a free or reduced lunch) make up more than half the K-12 student body—in Wisconsin only 31%. Florida's K-12 schools have a “majority minority” ethnic mix, while minorities comprise only 22.8% of Wisconsin's K-12 population. Florida spends below the national average on per student funding at \$7,917 per pupil. Wisconsin spends considerably more at \$10,112 per pupil.

That being said, Wisconsin, with a less challenging K-12 student demographic profile, has made less progress on early childhood literacy since the late 1990s. In 1998, Wisconsin 4th graders scored 16 points ahead of their Florida counterparts on reading. In 2007, Wisconsin 4th graders were one point BEHIND!

Major student subgroups show the same pattern: free and reduced-lunch-eligible students, African American students, and students with disabilities in Florida were all well behind their Wisconsin counterparts in 1998, but well ahead in 2007.

Wisconsin could enjoy the same level of progress by embracing strong accountability measures, alternative teacher certification, and expanded parental choice.

DEFEATING DEMOGRAPHY: LESSONS FROM FLORIDA'S REVOLUTIONARY REFORMS

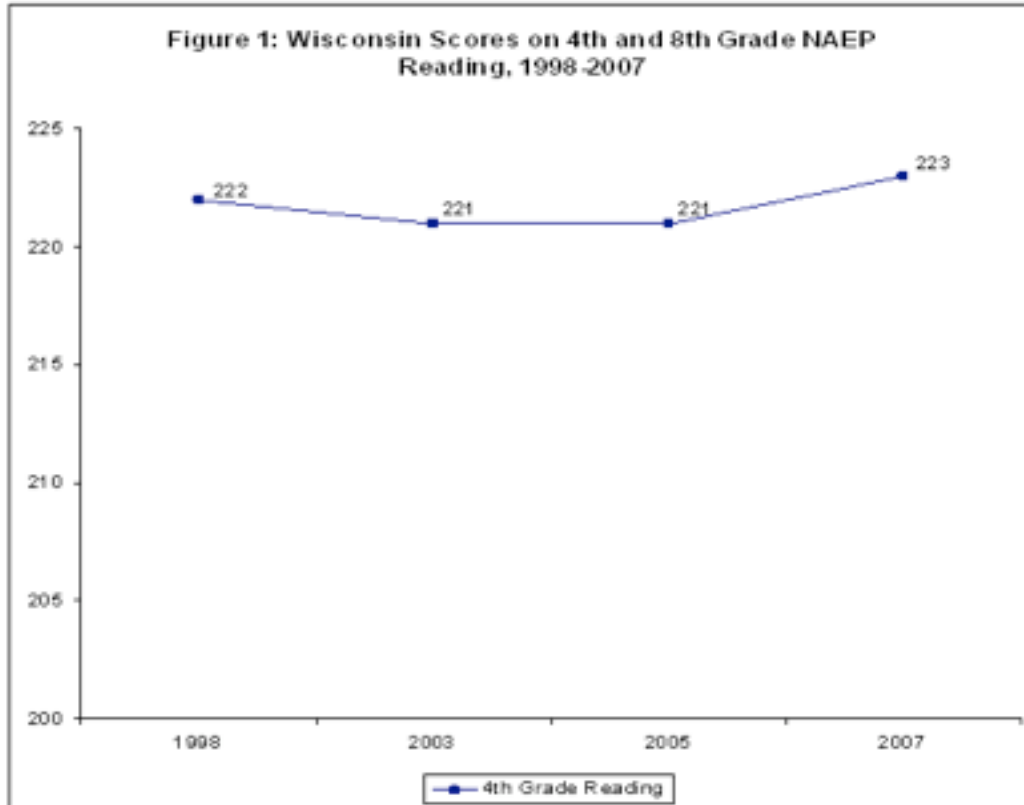
Florida has a much more difficult-to-educate K-12 demographic profile than Wisconsin overall. In Florida, low-income students (eligible for a free or reduced lunch under federal guidelines) make up more than half the K-12 student body, with a “majority minority” ethnic mix. Low-income students comprise only 31% of Wisconsin’s K-12 population. Racial and ethnic minorities comprise only 22.8% of the Wisconsin’s K-12 population. Florida spends below the national average on per student funding at \$7,917 per pupil. Wisconsin spends considerably more at \$10,112 per pupil.

Given all of this, it is not surprising to find that Wisconsin had generally scored higher than Florida on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exams. The trends, however, currently favor Florida, especially when examining student subgroups.

WISCONSIN'S LOST DECADE OF EDUCATION REFORM

The following charts illustrate Florida’s significant successes over the past decade. Unfortunately, these charts also demonstrate Wisconsin’s stagnant progress.

Figure 1 (below) shows Wisconsin's 4th grade reading scores on the NAEP between 1998 and 2007. The only term that comes to mind when describing the trend is "flat."



In each of these years, Wisconsin students scored above the national average, 8 points above in 1998, 3 points above in 2007. Given the demographic profile of the state, this small and shrinking advantage is not impressive.

Figure 2 (below) demonstrates Wisconsin's Black-White achievement gap in 4th grade reading scores between 1998 and 2007. Interesting to note, Wisconsin's African American students made a large improvement between 1998 and 2003, but then gave back most of those gains between 2003 and 2007. In 2007, Wisconsin's Black-White achievement gap—38 points—was the highest of any state in the nation on the NAEP 4th grade reading exam.

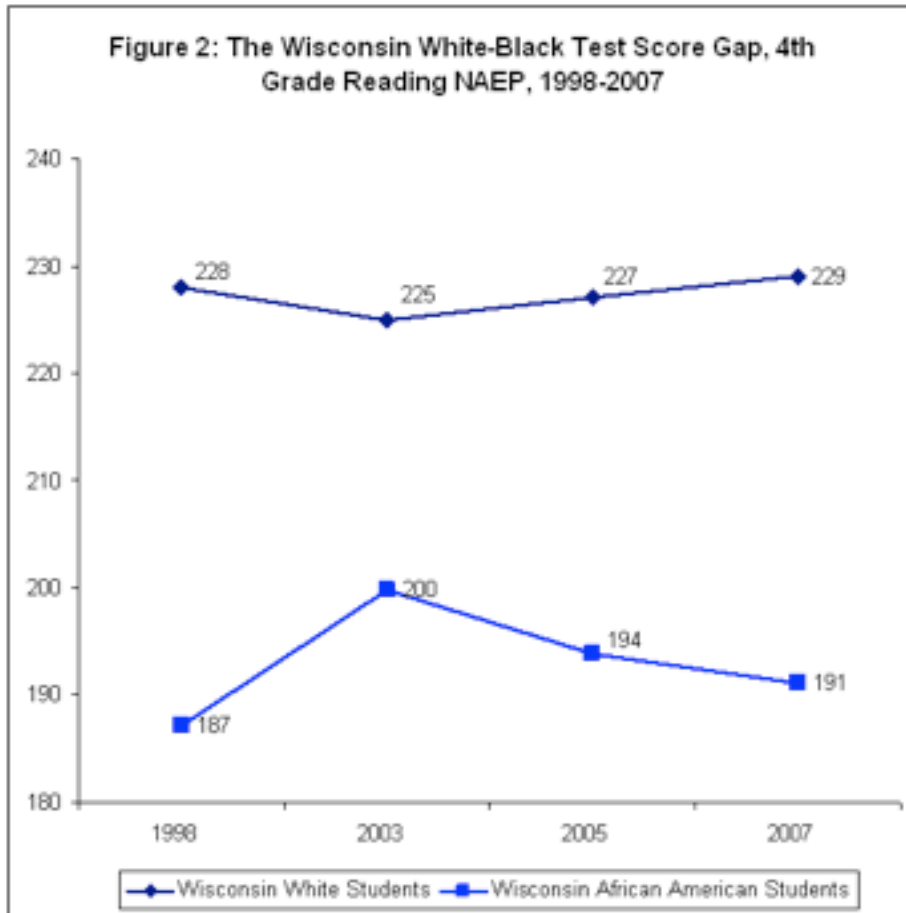
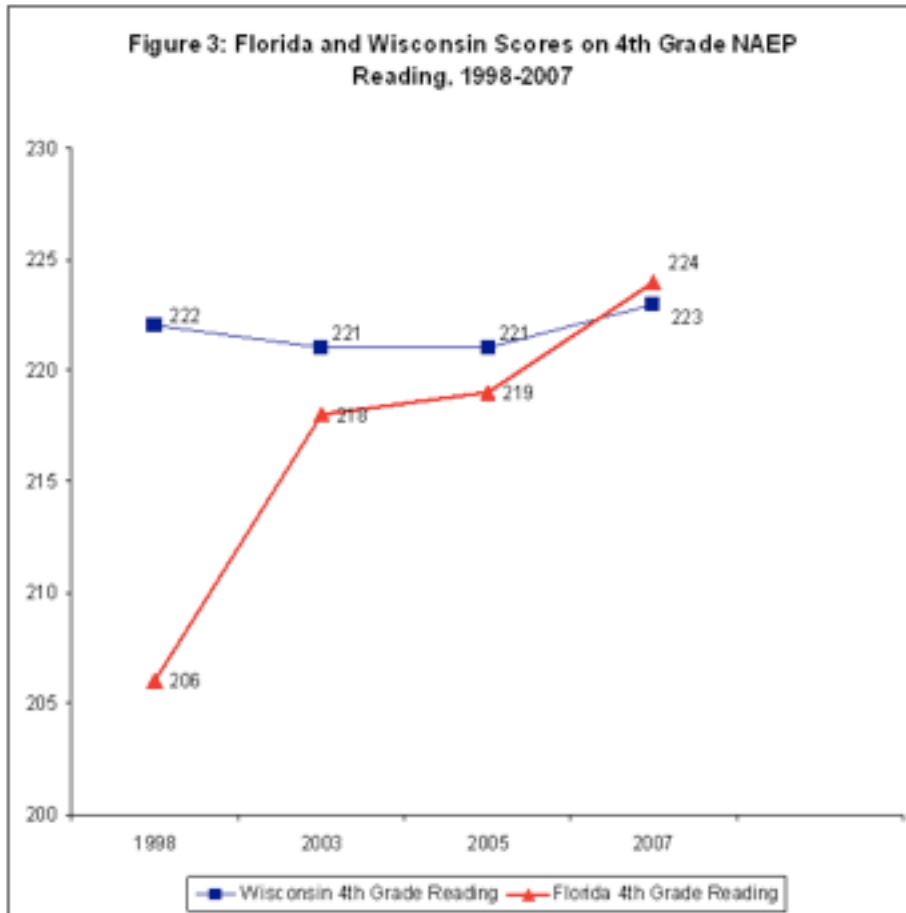
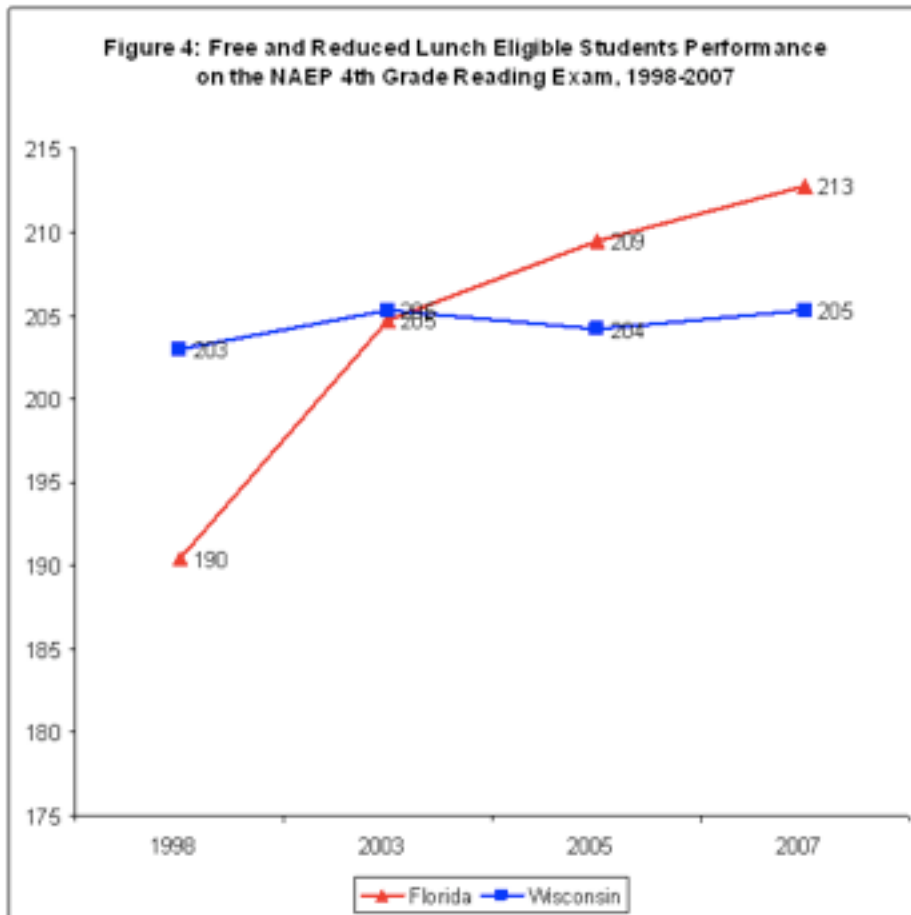


Figure 3 compares overall 4th grade reading scores in Wisconsin and Florida between 1998 and 2007. Given the large demographic and spending advantages, it is not surprising to see the average Wisconsin 4th grader far ahead of the average Floridian in 1998.



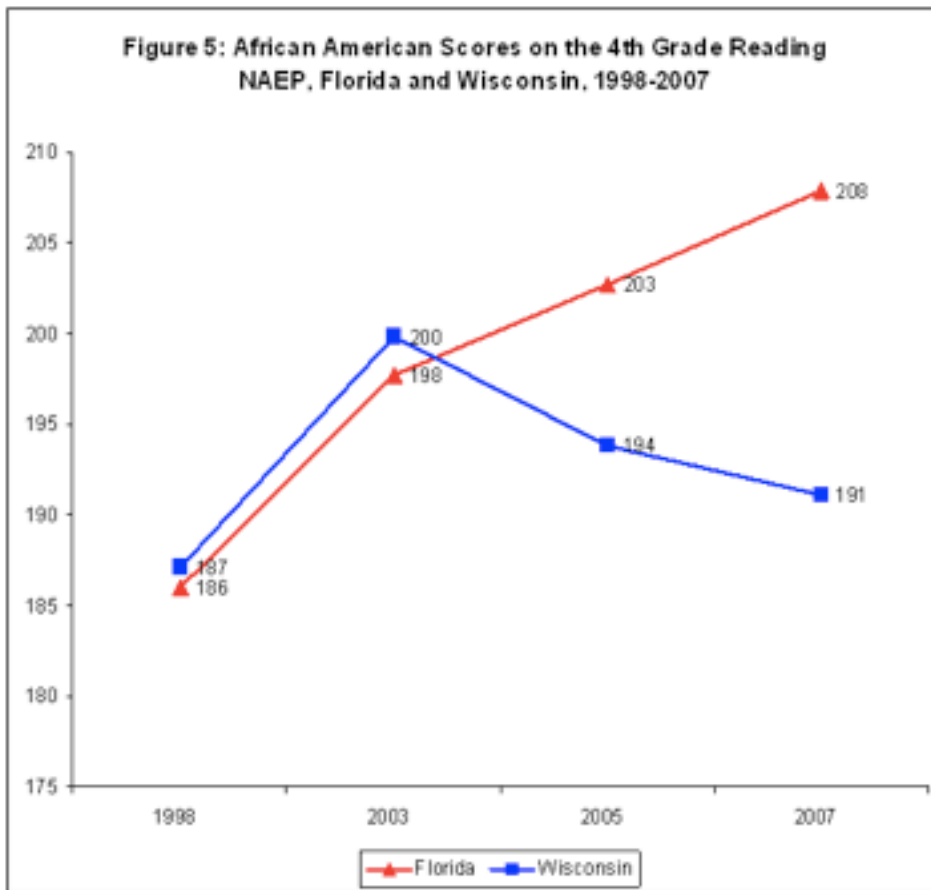
The contrast in trends, however, is stark. While Wisconsin's average score increased by a single point, Florida's average score increased by 18 points. In 2007, Florida's average score exceeded that of Wisconsin.

The score comparisons become more disproportional when comparing student sub-groups. Some argue that policy efforts should be judged by how they impact the least advantaged among us. Figure 4 applies this standard by tracking the progress of low-income children in Wisconsin and Florida. The federal free and reduced lunch program serves as a standard measure of income in schools. Eighty percent of free and reduced price lunch eligible children qualify for a free lunch. In 2007, a family of four could earn no more than \$28,650 to qualify for a free price lunch. Florida's students, whose family income fell below that qualification, scored 13 points behind the Wisconsin average in 1998, but scored 8 points ahead in 2007.

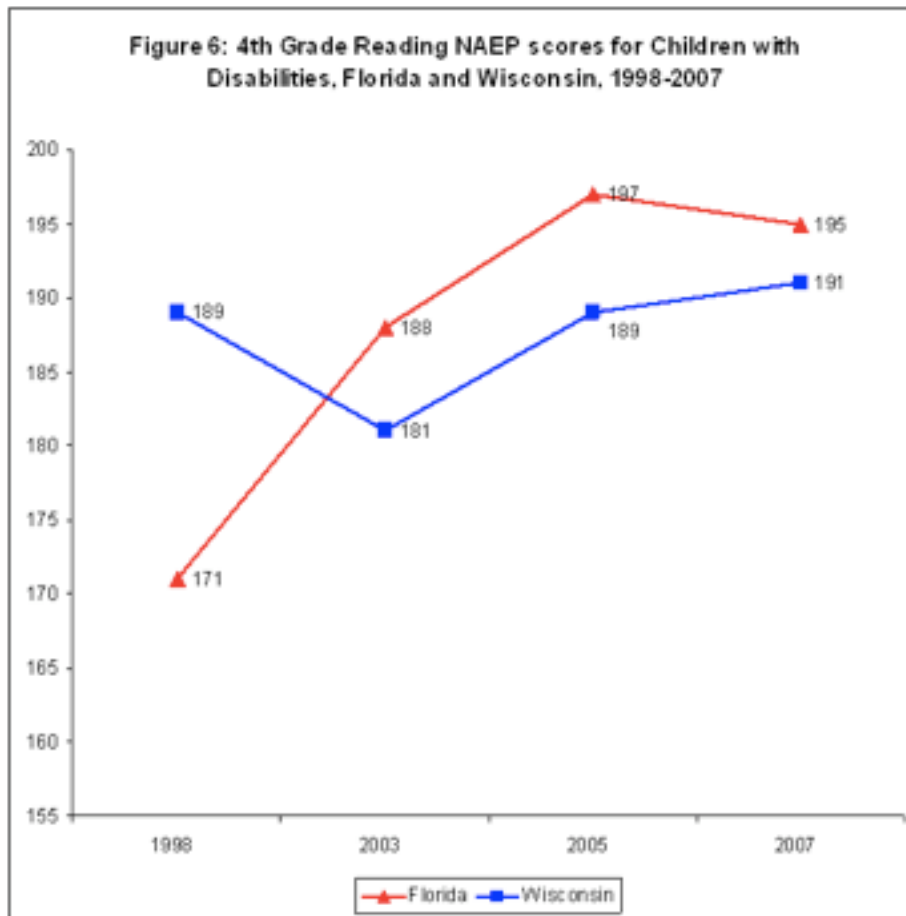


Free and reduced-lunch-eligible children in Florida surged from being well behind the average for similar students in Wisconsin to well ahead. Florida students not only closed this gap, but actually built a significant lead among low-income children. These gains were made despite the fact that there are more English as a second language (ESL) students and less per pupil spending in Florida.

The comparison is even more lopsided when comparing the scores of African American students, as presented in Figure 5. Florida's African American scores exceeded or tied two statewide averages for all students in 2007. Wisconsin had the lowest African American 4th grade reading scores in the nation in 2007.



Finally, the trend among children with disabilities shows the same pattern, with Florida students making far more progress than Wisconsin students. In 1998, Florida's students with special needs were 18 points behind the average scores of Wisconsin special needs students. In 2007, they were four points ahead.



Florida's significant academic gains during this period were not limited to 4th grade reading. Since the mid to late 1990s, Florida's progress has exceeded that of Wisconsin in 4th grade reading, 4th grade mathematics, 8th grade reading, 8th grade mathematics, 8th grade science and 8th grade writing. In short, Florida's students have made more academic progress than Wisconsin's students on every NAEP test with statewide results.

FLORIDA'S K-12 REFORMS

Governor Jeb Bush pushed through a bracing dual strategy of accountability from both the top-down (state testing) and bottom-up (parental choice) models in 1999. Governor Bush's A+ Plan emphasized standards for the schools and transparency for parents. Failing schools faced real consequences for prolonged failure, including school vouchers for their students.

Bush's choice strategy also included the creation of the nation's largest voucher program: the McKay Scholarship Program which serves students with disabilities, and the Step Up for Students tax credit for economically-disadvantaged children. Today, more than 820 Florida private schools educate almost 19,000 children with disabilities through McKay.

A similar number of low-income parents exercise choice through the Step Up for Students program. Florida also has a vigorous and growing charter school program, with 379 charter schools (and counting) educating over 106,000 students.

Florida reformers also implemented a number of strong systemic reforms, including reading instruction, the creation of financial incentives to encourage students to pass Advanced Placement exams, and alternative teacher certification. In recent years, half of Florida's new teachers have reached the classroom through alternative routes.

Florida's system of public school testing provides clear signals to parents, and strong sanctions for failing schools. All Florida schools are assigned a letter grade, A through F. The A+ plan made students attending a school ranked "F" two out of any four-year period eligible to receive a voucher. Evaluations from both the Manhattan Institute and the Urban Institute found that the program spurred significant academic improvement in eligible schools.

The Florida Supreme Court ruled this voucher program unconstitutional in 2006. Subsequently, an evaluation by Friedman Foundation Senior Fellow Greg Forster found that progress in schools previously eligible for vouchers noticeably slowed.

Children who do not learn to read in the early grades almost never recover academically, falling farther and farther behind with each passing grade. Reaching the middle school years, they literally cannot read their textbooks. Such students become academically frustrated and often disruptive. Hopelessly behind, these children begin dropping out of school in large numbers in the 8th grade. All too often, these students begin to appear on welfare rolls and in state prisons as young adults.

As a result, researchers focus heavily on 4th grade reading scores. In 1998, a stunning 47 percent of Florida 4th graders were on this "dropout track," scoring below basic on the 4th grade NAEP reading test. Florida reformers, henceforth, curtailed the social promotion of elementary students unable to read at a developmentally appropriate age.

Florida's reform record provides hope to a nation struggling to improve education and to close racial achievement gaps. Given the proper incentives, public schools can improve. Disadvantaged children can learn at levels previously thought reserved for the privileged.

Demography need not become education destiny. Consider the following question: If you were a low-income minority student, would you want to learn in a public school in Wisconsin, or one in Florida, given the relative success of schools in each state?

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH WISCONSIN?

Parental Choice

The comparison between Florida and Wisconsin actually involves what Florida did right, rather than what Wisconsin did wrong. Both states have pursued expanded parental choice options, but Florida has simply done more. The Center for Education Reform ranks Florida's charter school law 6th in the nation, while Wisconsin's is ranked 21st.¹ Wisconsin blazed a trail in private parental choice with the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Florida has two statewide private choice programs of comparable size, and has been a leader in virtual schooling as well. Wisconsin has a strong parental choice program, but Florida has now exceeded the trailblazer.

Wisconsin should expand parental choice options outside of free and reduced-lunch-eligible students in Milwaukee. Florida's private choice programs are statewide and

¹Center for Education Reform. 2008 Charter School Laws at-a-Glance: Current Rankings from First to Worst. Available online at http://www.edreform.com/_upload/ranking_chart.pdf

make two groups of students who are all too often poorly served by the public school system eligible for choice: students with disabilities and low-income students. Wisconsin should be just as bold, and should recognize that the case for parental choice is just as strong for a low-income child in Racine as it is for a low-income child in Milwaukee.

Likewise, one can only describe the case for parental options for special needs students as extremely compelling. The Manhattan Institute conducted a parental satisfaction survey of parents who had used the program to transfer and parents who had used a McKay scholarship to transfer, but had subsequently returned to a public school. The survey found that 92.7 percent of current McKay participants are satisfied or very satisfied with their McKay schools while only 32.7 percent were similarly satisfied with their public schools. McKay parents found that their child's class size dropped dramatically, from an average of 25.1 students per class in public schools to 12.8 students per class in McKay schools.

In public schools, 46.8 percent of disabled students were bothered often and 24.7 percent suffered physical assault, while in McKay schools, 5.3 percent were bothered often and 6.0 percent reported assault.² In addition, the test scores of children with disabilities have been found to have improved more in schools with greater participation in the McKay program. Most telling, more than 90 percent of parents who had withdrawn their children from the program believe it should continue to be available to those who wish to use it.³

² Greene, Jay P. and Marcus A. Winters. 2003. "Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida's McKay Scholarship Program." Manhattan Institute Civic Report 38, available on the internet at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_38.htm.

³ Greene, Jay P. and Marcus A. Winters. 2008. "The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida's McKay Scholarship Program." Manhattan Institute Civic Report 52, available on the internet at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_52.htm.

Alternative Teacher Certification

Another area of difference that stands out includes alternative teacher certification. Writing for the Hoover Institute, Paul Peterson and Daniel Nadler classified states into those having genuine alternative certification, and those that did not. The criteria for genuine certification involved whether applicants for certification were required to take the traditional amount of college coursework for certification, which is a large deterrent for many potential career switchers. Florida is a leader in genuine alternative certification, and 21 states in total have alternative certification options—Wisconsin is not one of them.

Peterson and Nadler pose the question: what happens in states adopting genuine alternative certification? The answer: NAEP scores improve, and more minorities enter into the teaching profession.

Florida and Wisconsin follow this pattern precisely. When judging the racial and ethnic composition of the teaching workforce compared to that of their population over the age of 21, Florida has one of the most racially integrated public school teaching forces in the nation. By contrast, Wisconsin schools have only half the number of minority teachers as there are minority adults, aged 21 and older, in the population.⁴

Alternative certification opens whole new pools of talent for entry into the profession. A recent study by the Brookings Institute found no meaningful difference between teach-

⁴ Peterson, Paul and Daniel Nadler. 2009. "What Happens When States Have Genuine Alternative Certification?" Article in the Winter 2009 edition of *Education Next*. Available online at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/34564684.html>

ers based upon student test score gains by certification status.⁵ The study found huge variation in the relative effectiveness of teachers, but that it had nothing to do with teacher certification. Teacher certification as currently practiced is simply serving as a barrier to entry into the profession which denies students access to a number of high quality potential teachers.

Standards and Accountability

Florida, once again, far exceeds Wisconsin in this area. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation recently published a study called *The Accountability Illusion*. The authors of this study took 18 elementary and 18 middle schools from around the country, and applied the varying accountability rules of 28 different states under NCLB to see which of them would make annual yearly progress (AYP) under which set of rules.

In essence, the study asked which states have manipulated fine details under No Child Left Behind to make it easiest for schools to make AYP. Technical details, such as how many students you require to make a subgroup, and adopted error margins can make a large difference.

Wisconsin, as it turned out, had the most lax standards in the nation. In fact, there were schools that made Annual Yearly Progress under Wisconsin's rules, but did not in any of the other 27 states examined.⁶ Wisconsin, in short, is a long way off from the tough-minded accountability of Florida's A+ plan.

⁵ Gordon, Robert, Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger. 2006. *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job*. Report of the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institute, available on the internet at http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2006/~//media/Files/rc/papers/2006/04education_gordon/200604hamilton_1.pdf.

⁶ Cronin, John, Michael Dahlin, Yun Xiang and Donna McCahon. 2009. *The Accountability Illusion*. Report of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, available on the internet at http://www.edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_the-accountability-illusion.

In fact, Wisconsin's accountability standards are embarrassingly far off from Florida's, with what might be the most lax academic standards in the country.

CONCLUSION: ANYTHING FLORIDA HAS DONE, WISCONSIN COULD DO BETTER

Florida students are improving academically at a significantly higher rate than Wisconsin students. In addition, children from minority populations are making the greatest improvements, demonstrating that Florida is making progress in the reduction of the achievement gap. The aggressive education reforms implemented by Florida policymakers over the past decade appear to be having a positive impact.

Specifically, initial evidence suggests that ending social promotion, increasing school accountability, and expanding parental choice in education are contributing to improved academic achievement and public school performance. Policymakers across the country should study Florida's model and implement similar systemic reforms.

More broadly, the Florida experience shows that the proper mix of education reforms can lead to levels of academic achievement for disadvantaged students that many have argued are impossible without massive increases in spending. Powerful interests, most notably the education unions, fought Governor Bush's education reforms almost every step of the way. Florida fashioned an enviable education legacy after 1998—one that proves that demography is not destiny.

An old saying holds that the difference between a condition and a problem lies in whether or not you have given up. A problem is something you are still trying to solve. A condition is something that one has grown to accept as unalterable.

Florida's improvement in minority and economically-disadvantaged student academic achievement proves once and for all that this widespread reality constitutes a problem to be solved, not a condition to be accepted. Other states should follow Florida's lead in combining incentive and instructional-based reforms, and in fact, take them further. America's disadvantaged children await these reforms that are tragically overdue.

Florida's success should inspire replication in other states; but in the end, Florida's reforms should be viewed as a floor, not a ceiling. While Florida's reforms have greatly improved education in that state, they are still a ways off from achieving true international competitiveness when compared to our Asian and European competitors.

Florida's reforms seemed bold indeed in 1999, but with such strong evidence of their success, the question becomes: why not do more and push farther?